

Yeast plant in Oakland will close

Neighbors have complained
about smell, chemical releases

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A West Oakland yeast plant under fire from community and environmental activists for emitting a strong stench and potentially hazardous chemicals is closing its doors.

LeSaffre Yeast Corp. is closing the Red Star Yeast plant near BART's West Oakland Station "due to a combination of market economics and challenging California environmental conditions," the company said.

Activists who had been fighting to shut down the plant celebrated the news Tuesday.

"Hallelujah! I can't tell you how excited I am," said Monsa Nitoto, chair of the Coalition for West Oakland Revitalization, which plans to build housing near the factory. "It's so important we get this stuff out of the community."

Oakland City Councilwoman Nancy Nadel, who represents West Oakland, said the plant will close April 15. Its nearly 50 employees received layoff notices Monday.

Opponents of the plant, which has operated in West Oakland for more than 100 years, have said its emissions of a strong odor and acetaldehyde, a probable human carcinogen, are causing health problems from asthma to cancer in the neighborhood. But company officials said the emissions are safe, and regulators said they were below allowable levels.

But Red Star was facing more stringent regulations that would have required the company to reduce emissions by 90 percent of their peak level, the strongest standard in the country, said Lu-

cia Libretti of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

That would have required the factory, the last remaining yeast facility in the Bay Area, to install new equipment.

The air district also had issued four public nuisance odor violations, which could carry fines of up to \$10,000 each, against the company since the fall, Libretti said.

Bradley Angel of the San Francisco environmental group Greenaction said protesters — not the air district — pressured Red Star to close. Activists and Oakland city officials had complained that the air district was not doing enough to control the odors and was almost certain to renew the plant's operating permit.

"Even if government agencies fail to do their jobs and enforce the laws and protect the public, the community can protect their health by challenging polluters and the government agencies that protect them," said Angel, whose group also was instrumental in the fight against an East Oakland medical waste incinerator that closed in 2001.

LeSaffre, the world's largest yeast producer, is headquartered in France and acquired the Red Star plant and brand in 2001. Company officials in Oakland and Milwaukee did not return calls for comment Tuesday.

In a statement, officials said the industrial bakeries that Red Star supplies would get their yeast from other factories, including those in Milwaukee and Baltimore.

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